

Earth Day: A Time to Reflect

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On Earth Day this year, we are only one year away from the 30th anniversary of the first Earth Day, which also marked the founding of the U. S. Environmental Protection Agency.

In 1970, when EPA set out to protect human health and the environment on the first Earth Day, there was a great national debate about whether we could afford it. The debate was dominated by an apparent contradiction between jobs versus the environment.

Many people wondered whether we could afford to clean up the environment. They feared that environmental protection would kill businesses and ruin our national economy.

On the other side, many Americans were equally sincere in wondering -- considering the terrible health risks -- how we could afford NOT to protect public health, to safeguard our water supplies, and to ensure that all Americans could breathe clean, healthy air, and to clean up after a century of industrial dumping.

Three decades later, the whole “jobs versus the environment” issue has been discredited, thanks to great strides forward in economic growth, industrial technology, and the scientific knowledge...not to mention good old Yankee ingenuity.

On Earth Day 1999, economic and environmental growth go hand in hand. In fact, protecting the environment creates many new jobs. The U.S. market for environmental technology and services is more than \$180 billion per year, and 1.3 million Americans are employed by this rapidly growing industry.

Under the Clinton-Gore Administration, the economy is strong and growing, unemployment is at an all-time low, and 18 million new jobs have been created.

At the same time, Americans benefit from the toughest air quality standards in a generation, standards that will prevent up to 15,000 premature deaths a year and improve the lives of millions of Americans who suffer from respiratory illnesses.

To ensure that our families have healthy, clean tap water, America's 55,000 water utilities will soon be providing regular reports to their customers on the quality of their drinking water. And we are making major strides in cleaning up streams, rivers and lakes.

EPA's brownfields program is cleaning up and revitalizing abandoned industrial properties in 227 communities around the country. This program has leveraged \$1 billion in public and private funds, created thousands of new jobs and turned idle land back to productive and profitable use. And this urban redevelopment has spared suburban green spaces from development.

We have cleaned up nearly 585 Superfund toxic waste sites in the past six years, and expect to clean up another 85 sites by the end of 2000.

A booming economy and a thriving environment. That's real progress. But there's more to do.

If our cities and towns are to thrive --not just survive --in the 21st Century, we need to make them more livable. This is the best alternative to uncontrolled development of our farms, meadows and forests -- our green spaces -- which get gobbled up at a rate of nearly 50 acres every hour of every day.

This sprawl consumes our most prized agricultural lands, which produce 79 percent of our fruits, 69 percent of our vegetables and 52 percent of our milk.

Making cities livable enough to reverse migration to the rural countryside not only would save green space, but also would save America \$74 billion per year. That's the estimated cost to the American economy in wasted time and the annual waste of six billion gallons of fuel.

Under the Administration's Better America Bonds proposal -- modeled after EPA's program to help local communities clean up and redevelop brownfields -- communities across the country will set their own priorities, make their own decisions, improve their own quality of life and decide for themselves their best path toward economic revitalization.

The Better America Bonds program will provide tax credits to states and communities so they can leverage, over five years, almost \$10 billion worth of bonds to build more livable communities by preserving open space, protecting water quality, and helping revitalize community centers.

There is also a large transportation component --\$6.1 billion --to reduce congestion, encourage transit, improve air quality, and grants to localities for smart growth planning.

The President has also proposed his Lands Legacy Initiative, which will invest \$1 billion in the purchase and protection of precious lands and coastal waters. That will be a big help in protecting the vital estuaries and bays of the mid-Atlantic region.

This is what our livability agenda is about. Helping our communities create a better quality of life for our working families, a better environment for business, all the while protecting our health and preserving our natural wonders.

Earth Day is the natural time to reflect on how far we have come. It is the right time to realize the important role that environmental protection plays in protecting our health and balancing our economy.

And as we prepare for a new millennium, it is the best time to plan for the safe, healthy and prosperous world that we will leave to generations to come.